Teaching social skills: teaching sheets

A free set of teaching sheets from Special Learning for day program and direct support staff, to use WITH an adult: ask which skill they want, practice in role-play and in the real place, honor every “no,” and let the person lead. These are skills the person chooses, and different ways of socializing, including autistic ways, are respected, not fixed. Edit every sheet for the person. These sheets are practice guidance; they do not replace the person’s plan, the plan’s author, your licensing rule or your funder’s contract.

How to use the sheets

1. Ask the person which social skill they want to learn and where they would use it. Write the goal in their words.
2. Pick the sheet. Edit the steps with the person: places, people, words, and more than one way to do each step.
3. Agree on a private signal for help, and on how the person says stop.
4. Teach in a role-play with behavioral skills training: instruct, model, rehearse and give feedback. Run it more than once.
5. Go to the real place with the person. Stand back and wait before you prompt. Give the lightest prompt that works, privately.
6. Fill in the data sheet right after, marking role-play (R) or real setting (W) and a code for each step.
7. Practice with different people and in different places, and fade a prompt on any step done the same way a few sessions in a row.
8. Once a month, do the review box with the person, and take distress, refusal, flat data or a safety concern to your supervisor and the clinician.

The person’s choice, first

Pick the skill with the person. Ask what they want to do in their own life: “What would you like to be able to say or do at work, in the store, with friends?” Their answer, in their words, is the goal on the sheet. Team members and the person’s clinician can add what they have seen; they do not answer for the person.

Different is not wrong. People socialize in many ways. Some prefer a wave to a handshake, a text to a call, a short chat to a long one, or quiet over company. Autistic ways of socializing are ways of socializing. Teach options (“here are three ways to say hello”) so the person can choose the one that feels like them, rather than one “right” way. Eye contact, small talk and smiling are options, not requirements.

Teach the skill, not the mask. The aim is for the person to get what they want, whether that is help, a friend or a good day at work, on their own terms. It is not for the person to hide who they are. One review of how staff talk with people with intellectual disabilities names a dilemma worth keeping in mind: “Adapting Communication versus Downplaying Difference” (a dilemma for staff communication, not a finding about masking).

Relationships, including dating, belong to the person. The Code asks DSPs to “separate my personal beliefs about relationships, including sexual relationships, from those of the people I support.” Teach the skill the person asks about, respect their pace and privacy, and take questions about sexual health to a qualified health educator or the person’s team.

Safety is part of skill, and so is no. Teaching how to say no and set a boundary matters at least as much as teaching how to say yes. A “no” from the person is honored in practice, not only on the sheet. Any concern about abuse, neglect or exploitation goes to your reporting process right away.

Behavioral skills training and prompt levels

Teach in four parts, then practice in the real place. Use the lightest prompt that works, privately, and wait before you prompt. The codes below go on the data sheet.

Part	What you do	Respect note
Instruct	Say what the skill is, why it is useful to the person and what the steps are. Keep it short. Ask: “Is this something you want?”	The person’s reason comes first, not ours.
Model	Show it: you, a coworker or a short video does the steps while the person watches. Show more than one way.	Use adult scenes and settings the person goes to.
Rehearse	The person tries the steps in a role-play with a practice partner. Run it more than once, and change the person or the situation a little each time.	The person can say “stop” or pick a different script at any time.
Feedback	Say what went well first and be specific. Offer one thing to try next time. Ask how it felt and what the person wants to change.	Respect the person’s style. Feedback is about getting what they want, not about acting “normal.”

Where this comes from: Ryan et al. (2019), Journal of Intellectual Disabilities; Parsons, Rollyson and Reid (2012), Behavior Analysis in Practice. A study with six adults with autism used instructions, modeling, practice and feedback in small groups; the same approach has been described for training staff.

Prompt levels

Code	Level	What you do	Note
I	**Independent**	The person does the step with no help.	Wait. Give the person time to start.
G	**Gesture**	A private signal the person picked, such as a touch of the lanyard.	No words and no one else can tell.
V	**Verbal**	A quiet question or a few words: “What might you say?”	Before the step if you can, not in front of others.
M	**Model**	You or a video show the step, or a card shows it.	The person tries it. Do not do it for them.

No physical prompts for social skills. Wait first; give the lightest prompt that works, privately; and fade it when the person does the step the same way a few sessions in a row (our practice).

Where this comes from: Gil et al. (2019), Behavior Analysis in Practice. Least-to-most prompting was used with young adults to teach a community skill. Our default is lightest first, privately, with a pause.

Teaching sheet 1: Greeting and introducing yourself

When the person wants this: When the person wants to say hello to a neighbor, a new coworker, a classmate or someone at a community event.

Person's goal, in their words: _____ Private signal for help: _____

#	Step (what the person does)	My change or note
1	Decide whether you want to say hello now (it is your choice)	
2	Face the person in the way that is comfortable for you	
3	Say hello in your own way: a word, a wave, a nod, a handshake or a message	
4	Say your name: "Hi, I'm ___."	
5	Add one more thing if you want: "I work in the kitchen," "I'm new to the group"	
6	Listen for their name or reply	
7	Say it back: "Nice to meet you, ___."	
8	Keep talking or move on, as you choose	

Role-play script (ours; the person changes the words)

Practice partner	Hi, I'm Sam. I'm new on the crew.
Person	Hi, I'm ___. Nice to meet you.
Practice partner	Have you worked here long?
Person	___ (answer in your own words). How about you?
Practice partner	Just started. Good to meet you.
Person	You too. See you around.

Practice in the real setting

☐ Pick two or three places the person already goes, such as the break room, the day program lobby or the front steps.

☐ The helper stands back and uses only the private signal the person chose. Do not speak for the person.

☐ Practice with one new or familiar person at a time, and with different people over time.

The person's choice: Eye contact is optional. A wave, a nod, a handshake, a fist bump, a text or a few words all count. Teach several, and let the person pick the one that feels like them.

Teaching sheet 2: Starting and ending a conversation

When the person wants this: When the person wants to chat with a coworker, housemate, friend or someone they meet at a community event.

Person's goal, in their words: _____ Private signal for help: _____

#	Step (what the person does)	My change or note
1	Choose someone and a good moment (they are not busy)	
2	Say hello	
3	Start with a question or a comment: "How was your weekend?" "Did you see the game?"	
4	Listen to the answer	
5	Answer a question or add something about yourself	
6	Ask a follow-up question or share something that fits	
7	Notice if they are ready to end (looking away, checking a phone, moving off)	
8	End it: "I've got to go. Good talking to you."	
9	Say goodbye	

Role-play script (ours; the person changes the words)

Person	Hi, ___. How was your weekend?
Practice partner	Good. I went fishing. You?
Person	___ (say one thing about your weekend).
Practice partner	Nice. Do you like fishing?
Person	___ (your own answer). What did you catch?
Practice partner	I should get back to work.
Person	Okay. Good talking to you.

Practice in the real setting

☐ Practice a short chat of a few turns in a real place such as the break room, bus stop or lobby; longer is not better.

☐ After the chat, ask the person how it felt and what they would do differently, if anything.

☐ Try with different people and at different times of day.

The person's choice: Some people like short chats, some like long ones, some prefer text, and talking about a favorite topic is a good way to connect. The person may end any conversation at any time.

Teaching sheet 3: Asking for help at work or in a store

When the person wants this: When the person wants to find something, check how to do a task, or ask a worker, manager or coworker for help.

Person's goal, in their words: _____ Private signal for help: _____

#	Step (what the person does)	My change or note
1	Notice that you need help	
2	Decide who to ask (a worker with a name tag, a manager, a coworker or a card you carry)	
3	Wait until they are free, or say "Excuse me"	
4	Say what you need: "Can you help me find ___?" "I'm not sure how to ___."	
5	Listen to the answer	
6	If you do not understand, ask again: "Can you say that again?" "Can you show me?"	
7	Say thank you	
8	If it did not work, ask someone else or tell the person who supports you	

Role-play script (ours; the person changes the words)

Person	Excuse me. Can you help me find the rice?
Practice partner	Sure. Aisle 6, on the left.
Person	Aisle 6. Can you show me?
Practice partner	I can walk you there.
Person	Thank you.

Practice in the real setting

☐ Role-play in the program first, then a real store, bus station or workplace task the person picked.

☐ The helper waits outside the aisle or across the room and uses a private signal only if the person wants one.

☐ Try different stores and different workers. Count the real tries on the data sheet.

The person's choice: Asking for help is a skill independent adults use every day. The person may use words, a card, a note on their phone or an agreed message through a support person, and chooses the way that works for them.

Teaching sheet 4: Saying no and setting a boundary

When the person wants this: When the person wants to turn down a request, an invitation, a pressure to spend money, touch they do not want or a conversation they do not want to have.

Person's goal, in their words: _____ Private signal for help: _____

#	Step (what the person does)	My change or note
1	Notice how you feel and remember that it is your choice	
2	Decide your answer: yes, no, not now or maybe later	
3	Say it clearly: "No, thank you." "I don't want to." "I'm not comfortable with that."	
4	Keep it short; you do not have to give a long reason	
5	Say it again if you need to	
6	Move away or leave if they keep pushing	
7	Tell a person you trust (your support person, your supervisor) if you feel unsafe or pressured	
8	Remember you can change your mind later	

Role-play script (ours; the person changes the words)

Practice partner	Come on, lend me twenty dollars.
Person	No, thank you.
Practice partner	Just this once. Everybody does.
Person	I said no. I'm going to go now.
Practice partner	Fine.
Person	(walks away, then tells a trusted person)

Practice in the real setting

☐ Role-play several different situations the person has told you about or might face: money, a request for a favor, a conversation they want to leave.

☐ Practice real, low-stakes noes in daily life, such as turning down an offer of a second helping or an invitation to a show.

☐ Staff honor the person's no in daily life too, and say so.

The person's choice: This sheet is about the person's rights, not about teaching them to comply. Any concern about abuse, neglect or exploitation goes to your reporting process right away, and the person is never blamed for saying no.

Teaching sheet 5: Handling a disagreement calmly

When the person wants this: When the person wants to disagree with a coworker, housemate or friend without it turning into an argument.

Person's goal, in their words: _____ Private signal for help: _____

#	Step (what the person does)	My change or note
1	Notice how your body feels (tight, hot, fast)	
2	Pause: take a breath, or a short break	
3	Say what you think: "I see it differently."	
4	Listen to the other person's view	
5	Look for something you can both do: "Could we ___?"	
6	Choose: agree, agree to disagree, or ask someone to help	
7	If you need a break, say so: "I need a few minutes."	
8	Come back to it, or let it go	

Role-play script (ours; the person changes the words)

Practice partner	I wanted the table by the window.
Person	I see it differently. I was here first.
Practice partner	That is not fair.
Person	I hear you. Could we switch tomorrow?
Practice partner	Okay, tomorrow is mine.
Person	Deal.

Practice in the real setting

☐ Practice with small, real disagreements about things the person cares about, such as music, seats, chores or plans.

☐ Teach the break line ("I need a few minutes") and honor it every time.

☐ If a disagreement is about safety or a workplace rule, the person takes it to a supervisor.

The person's choice: Disagreeing is allowed. The goal is to be heard, not to give in. A break is always an option, and the person does not have to agree to be polite.

Teaching sheet 6: Making plans with a friend

When the person wants this: When the person wants to invite a friend to do something, or answer an invitation. The same steps work for asking someone on a date.

Person's goal, in their words: _____ Private signal for help: _____

#	Step (what the person does)	My change or note
1	Think of what you would like to do and who you would like to ask	
2	Pick how to reach them: in person, a call or a text	
3	Ask: "Do you want to ___ on ___?"	
4	Offer a day and a time, or two options	
5	Listen to their answer; if it is no, that is okay: "Maybe another time"	
6	Agree on the place, the time, how to get there and what it will cost	
7	Check the ride or the bus and your money	
8	Remind them the day before, if you want	
9	Go, enjoy it, and say thanks afterward	

Role-play script (ours; the person changes the words)

Person	Hi, ___. Do you want to get coffee on Saturday?
Practice partner	Maybe. What time?
Person	How about 2 o'clock at the corner cafe?
Practice partner	Sorry, I can't Saturday.
Person	No problem. Maybe another time.
Practice partner	Yes! Let's try next week.

Practice in the real setting

☐ Role-play, then send or say the real invitation. Let the person pick who to invite.

☐ Plan the how with the person: transportation, money, and a plan for the meeting that the person agrees to, following the person's plan and your policy.

☐ Staff do not choose friends or read messages without the person's permission.

The person's choice: Whom to invite is the person's choice. The same steps can be used to ask someone on a date. The person decides who, whether and when, and a "no" from the other person is answered kindly. Questions about sex and relationships go to a qualified health educator or the person's team.

Teaching sheet 7: Phone and text etiquette

When the person wants this: When the person wants to call or text a friend, a family member, an employer or a service.

Person's goal, in their words: _____ Private signal for help: _____

#	Step (what the person does)	My change or note
1	Check that it is a good time (not at work, not late at night)	
2	Start: "Hi, it's ___."	
3	Say why you are calling or texting	
4	Wait for the answer and give them time	
5	Keep texts short and clear	
6	Do not send many messages in a row if there is no answer yet	
7	Share personal information and photos only with people you trust	
8	End: "Talk later. Bye."	

Role-play script (ours; the person changes the words)

Person	Hi, it's ___. Is this a good time?
Practice partner	Yes, go ahead.
Person	I'm calling about Saturday. Are you still coming?
Practice partner	Yes. What time?
Person	Two o'clock. See you then. Bye.

Practice in the real setting

☐ Practice on the person's own phone, with the person in charge of the screen.

☐ Try a real call or text now and then, to someone the person chose.

☐ Practice what to do when a call or message is unwelcome: do not answer, block the number, tell a trusted person, following the person's plan and your policy.

The person's choice: The person decides whether to call or text, and many prefer text. Voice-to-text, emoji and a short script are fine. Staff do not read the person's messages unless asked.

Teaching sheet 8: Workplace break-room conversation

When the person wants this: When the person works or volunteers and wants to be comfortable at breaks and lunch with coworkers.

Person's goal, in their words: _____ Private signal for help: _____

#	Step (what the person does)	My change or note
1	Decide if you want to chat or have a quiet break (both are okay)	
2	Say hello when you come in	
3	Listen first, then add to the conversation when it fits	
4	Pick topics that work at work: the weekend, food, weather, sports, shows	
5	Take turns talking and listening	
6	Keep private things private if you want to (such as health, or other people's business); whether to share your own pay is your choice	
7	Notice when people are busy or the break is ending	
8	End: "Back to work. See you later."	

Role-play script (ours; the person changes the words)

Practice partner	Did you see the game last night?
Person	No. Who won?
Practice partner	We did, in overtime.
Person	Nice. I watched a show about trains.
Practice partner	I like trains too.
Person	Break is almost over. See you later.

Practice in the real setting

☐ Practice at the real break time, with the job coach or helper out of sight of coworkers unless the person asks otherwise.

☐ Bring a topic card with two things to say if the person wants one.

☐ Check in privately after the break: what worked, and what the person wants to try next.

The person's choice: The break is the person's own time. Some people want to chat and some want quiet, and being quiet at lunch is not a problem. The helper never talks about the person's support in front of coworkers.

Practice data sheet: prompt level for each step

Fill it in right after each practice. In the first row write R for a role-play or W for the real setting. Then write one code for each step: I independent, G gesture, V verbal, M model. Count the steps marked I at the bottom.

Person	
Skill (sheet)	
Staff who taught, by date	

Step (copy from the sheet)	Date	Date	Date	Date	Date
Where: R role-play, W real setting					
1.					
2.					
3.					
4.					
5.					
6.					
7.					
8.					
9.					
10.					
Steps done independently (I count)					
Highest prompt needed					
What the person said					
Staff initials					

Codes: I independent · G gesture (a private signal the person picked) · V verbal (a quiet word or question) · M model. No physical prompts for social skills.

An example: Dana, asking for help in a store (invented)

Dana (invented), asking for help in a store (sheet 3). Invented numbers to show the layout. Dana did 2 of 7 steps on her own on Monday's role-play, 4 of 7 on Tuesday, and 2 and 3 of 7 in the store on Wednesday and Friday. In this example the real store needs more help than the role-play, so the team keeps practicing in the store, with the same steps, instead of moving on. Steps 2, 3, 4 and 6 are still prompted. The count is how many steps are marked I.

Step	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri
Where: R role-play, W real setting	**R**	**R**	**W**	**R**	**W**
1 Notice you need help	**I**	**I**	**I**	**I**	**I**
2 Decide who to ask	G	**I**	V	**I**	G
3 Wait, or say excuse me	V	G	V	G	V
4 Say what you need	M	V	M	G	V
5 Listen to the answer	**I**	**I**	**I**	**I**	**I**
6 Ask again if unsure	M	V	M	V	M
7 Say thank you	G	**I**	G	**I**	**I**
Steps done independently (I count)	**2 of 7**	**4 of 7**	**2 of 7**	**4 of 7**	**3 of 7**
What Dana said	OK	Good	Hard	Good	OK

Monthly review box

Do this once a month, with the person.

Month and skills practiced	
Role-play sessions and real-setting sessions (how many of each)	
Steps now independent in the real setting	
Steps still prompted, and the prompt level	
New people or places tried this month (generalization)	
What the person said about how it is going, and what they want next	
What is working	
What to change next month (steps, prompt level, place, people)	
Ask the supervisor or clinician? (distress, refusal, flat data, a safety concern)	
Reviewed with the person on	

An example monthly review (invented)

Month and skills practiced	November, asking for help in a store
Role-play sessions and real-setting sessions (how many of each)	6 role-plays, 5 real store visits
Steps now independent in the real setting	1, 5 and 7 (3 of 7)
Steps still prompted, and the prompt level	2 gesture; 3 and 4 verbal; 6 model
New people or places tried this month (generalization)	Two new stores, one new worker
What the person said about how it is going, and what they want next	“The pharmacy is the hardest.” She wants to practice there next.
What is working	Card with the sentence; walking in first; helper waiting by the door
What to change next month (steps, prompt level, place, people)	Fade verbal to gesture on 3 and 4; add the pharmacy
Ask the supervisor or clinician? (distress, refusal, flat data, a safety concern)	No
Reviewed with the person on	Friday, at the program, with Dana choosing the next skill

Checklist, sources and one next step

Before you finish

☐ I asked the person which skill they want, and wrote it in their words.
☐ I edited the sheet for this person, their places and the people in their life.
☐ We agreed on a private signal and on what happens if the person says “stop.”
☐ I taught with instruction, a model, a rehearsal and feedback.
☐ I practiced in the real setting, not only in role-play.
☐ I gave the lightest prompt that worked, and never corrected the person in front of others.
☐ I filled in the data sheet right after, marking role-play (R) or real setting (W).
☐ I planned practice with new people and in new places.
☐ I did the monthly review with the person and honored their choices.

Where each part comes from

Sources read November 16, 2026 (the eCFR text is current as of November 12; the research papers were read as published abstracts only). The eight teaching sheets, role-play scripts, practice plans, the data sheet and the monthly review box are Special Learning’s own practice guidance. 42 CFR 441.301 covers HCBS waivers; your state and agency may differ. None of these organizations has reviewed or endorsed these sheets.

42 CFR 441.301(c)(4). https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-42/chapter-IV/subchapter-C/part-441/subpart-G/section-441.301
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Dubreucq et al. (2022), Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders. https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/33963965/
Atkinson-Jones and Hewitt (2018), British Journal of Learning Disabilities. https://ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid:3646a22b-70e1-4e93-828f-3f76d7450213
Chinn et al. (2026), Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities. https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/42212545/

One next step

If your staff support autistic people, the Level 1 ABA Online Training Course for groups introduces autism and behavior-support foundations, including errorless teaching and prompting. $99 per learner · One-time purchase · Each learner has 12 weeks of access from the day they activate their code · Free 7-day trial of the first 2 sessions.

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